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Sihanouk Bid to Visit VC Camp Hints Shift in Red Strategy

THE MOST remarkable piece of news about Vietnam that has appeared in many months was a story on Monday by the AP's brilliant photographer, Horst Faas, and AP reporter George McArthur. They described a visit to a sanctuary-camp on the other side of the Cambodian border that had been freshly evacuated by "a major headquarters command group" of the enemy forces.

What was so remarkable was not the story's contents. To be sure, the newspaper that claims pre-eminence in this country has more than once published denials of the Cambodian sanctuaries' very existence. But in fact everyone who is seriously informed has long known that sanctuary-bases in Cambodia were among the major assets of the North Vietnamese-Vietcong troops stationed on the western fringe of the II and III Corps regions of South Vietnam.

Indeed, President Johnson has long had before him proposals from Gen. William C. Westmoreland, endorsed by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, for drastic devaluation of these well known enemy assets.

Granting our troops the right of hot pursuit across the Cambodian border was again discussed, albeit inconclusively, while Bunker and Westmoreland have been here. And although this is not widely known, it still serves to highlight the significance of the Faas-McArthur report.

What made that report so remarkably significant, meanwhile, was the simple fact that Faas and McArthur were permitted to visit the North Vietnamese-Vietcong campsite by the Cambodian government, under Cambodian military escort. They knew in advance where they wished to go, but a thousand excuses could obviously have been found to prevent them from going there.

PRINCE NORODOM Sihanouk, Cambodia's one-man government, is both volatile

and eccentric; but the record shows that he has always been, in the words of the old saying, no more than "crazy like a fox." Furthermore, he, too, has repeatedly denied that the enemy forces in Vietnam were using Cambodian sanctuaries. Thus his decision to allow actual inspection of such a sanctuary requires — indeed urgently demands — some explanation.

There are only two rationally possible explanations. On the one hand, Prince Sihanouk is Asia's champion bandwagon-jumper. For years, he has been a conspicuous passenger on the Hanoi-Peking-VC bandwagon. Such signs as his reception of Mrs. John F. Kennedy have recently begun to suggest, however, that Prince Sihanouk was looking for a more dependable vehicle.

The circumstances of the Faas-McArthur report may, therefore, constitute another, far more decisive indication that the Prince now judges that a quick change of bandwagon is in order. If that is so, the Prince's views of the present stage of the war differ very widely indeed from the views of those who trumpet that Vietnam is a "stalemate."

As for the alternative (or perhaps supplementary) explanation, it is equally interesting. Briefly, one theory about Hanoi's new war strategy is that it calls for a partial retreat into classical, small unit, true guerrilla-style warfare. If this is correct (and the "if" must still be stressed), the very big enemy units on the Cambodian border would logically be marked for sacrifice, and the Cambodian sanctuaries would go out of use.

PUSHED FURTHER and further towards the border, into more and more remote jungles, the 9th VC Division, the 7th North Vietnamese Division and the regiments of the more northerly "B-3 Front" have long been cats that caught no mice, in the

all-important sense of being unable to give direct and effective support to VC bases in the country's populated areas.

Precisely these big units are the ones that have lately been hurled, with a cruelly wasteful hand, into the sanguinary fighting at Locninh and Dakto. Captured documents indicate that prior to these battles, outfits were consolidated to bring them up to strength — three under-strength battalions being merged into two fairly strong ones, for instance. This would not have been necessary if these famous units had continued to enjoy their former replacement priority. And changed replacement priorities would surely be the first sign of a much more major change lying ahead.

Thus the Locninh and Dakto battles may perhaps be interpreted as modern, far more costly versions of an antique military stratagem — double-piling all the campfires to get conspicuous blazes in order to cover a night-time retreat over the hills.

Locninh and Dakto have usefully served, as well, to draw American units from crucial populated areas. And these areas will thus be all the more vulnerable if the old big units from the Cambodian sanctuaries are broken down into platoons and companies and are infiltrated eastwards to help the hard-pushed VC in the populous rice plains of South Vietnam.

As yet, it must be emphasized, everything about this matter is intensely speculative. But the fact remains that Prince Sihanouk's decision to let American reporters inspect a sanctuary base-camp was tantamount to an invitation to "come and get it" to Gen. Westmoreland. Hence Sihanouk is either changing sides almost completely, or else he has reason to believe that the Cambodian sanctuaries will soon go out of use. Nothing else fits the facts.